

Title: Services in challenging times: immaterial labour and the unpaid work of patrons in the library as place and virtual space.

Siobhan Stevenson, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Faculty of Information  
University of Toronto  
45 Willcocks Street  
Toronto, ON M5S 1C  
Canada  
(416) 978-8285  
siobhan.stevenson@utoronto.ca

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### *Introduction and context*

Public libraries in Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and Scandinavia have embraced the discourse of Web 2.0 as an innovation that promises to recast and effectively update social relations between the historic institution of the public library and its users. Further, interactive programs that privilege the participation and creativity of self-selecting users to collectively produce content directly compliment the new customer service ethos of the institution. While modeling many of their services and management practices after those in the commercial sector, public libraries constitute their adoption of Web 2.0 applications as evidence of their continuing value as cornerstones of democracy where the peer-to-peer, collaborative and community-driven nature of social networking technologies are framed as instances of democracy and freedom in action. In addition, the immaterial (creative, symbolic, often language-based) and unwaged productive labour that is a product of social networking projects, e.g., user tagging of materials in a library catalogue, are constituted as contributing to the development of an information commons.

Evidence of the power of the Web to support human creativity and productivity within a voluntary, collaborative and open environment has been well documented (Lessig, 2001; Wark, 2004) increasingly, however, capital's ability to leverage the effective communicative action between autonomous individuals is considered a hallmark of social relations of production within a knowledge economy (cf. Dyer-Witheford, 1999). As a public institution within the era of e-government, e-democracy and e-commerce the public library's adoption of these technologies is not surprising. However, serious questions remain regarding how the discursive framing of these technologies inside the public library contribute to the structuring of post-Fordist social identities and relations in ways which privilege capital over labour and the consumer identity over that of the citizen. In addition, to the extent that proprietary social networking and gaming sites as well as online retail sellers variously capitalize on the unpaid intellectual and creative labour of participant users, they simultaneously undermine the value of waged labour. There are, of course, alternatives to the dominant discourses surrounding Web 2.0. Scholars working within the Marxist tradition have been quick to uncover the relationship between the emergence of Web 2.0 discourses and the creeping commercialization of the Internet (cf. Wark, 2007; Bauwens, 2009; Zimmer; 2008, Peterson, 2008). What is missing from current LIS literatures on the topic is an

exploration of the explanatory potential of these critical analyses for some of the more challenging questions facing the institute of the public library within today's knowledge economy. For instance, customers are not citizens, thus one question that needs to be answered is what happens to the citizen identity in all of this and, by extension, the role of the public library in fulfilling its democratic mandate? Similarly, when taking a page "out of the playbook of the mega bookstore" (Woodward, 2004) becomes the order of the day, what impact does this have on the public librarian who continues to be trained within a model of the library firmly entrenched in the language of the public sphere? Also, there is an underside to the new social networking technologies and information and communication technologies when applied to customer service delivery, namely the elimination of workers, or at least the ability to do more with less expensive, less skilled staff. Here, we might want to ask: what impact is the adoption of these ICT enabled self-servicing models, including those which support user participation in the structuring of knowledge having on library work including historically valued skills like cataloguing, classification and reference work?

### *Critical incisions*

This paper situates the public library's adoption of Web 2.0 technologies within the wider context of the neoliberal state's corporatization of the public sector. Here, the historic transformation of the library user/patron into a customer/information consumer--producer is considered at the rapidly disappearing boundary line between formerly discrete sites of human activity within capitalism: work (productivity) and consumption (circulation), and how this fundamental change is playing out within state institutions such as the public libraries. The purpose of this analysis is theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it expands upon current LIS scholarship dealing with the dismantling of the public sphere as a result of its corporatization (Buschman, 2005) by applying Regulation School theory's concept of modes of social regulation (Aglietta, 1979) to the institute of the public library. From a practical perspective, it is hoped that this analysis will resonate with public library practitioners and policy makers by providing them with a critical interpretation of contemporary managerial and service trends and highlighting where alternatives to the status quo exist.

### *Organization of paper and presentation of findings*

This paper is divided into two sections (although for the purposes of an oral presentation, section one would be significantly truncated and the emphasis of the talk would be on the case study and key findings in the second section). Section one consists of a brief review of Regulation School theory paying particular attention to its theorization of the role of the state within capitalism and the ways in which state institutions function as modes of social regulation—regulating the behaviour of citizens, workers, consumers—while simultaneously legitimating state policies which privilege capital accumulation. In today's neoliberal regime, the corporatization of the public sector including the state's discursive embrace of Web 2.0 represents an important site for research into the nature of contemporary class struggles, including struggles over what it means to be a citizen, consumer and worker within a post-Fordist information

economy. Part two is an example of the approach's explanatory potential when combined with a discourse analysis of a series of high level Ontario public library planning documents dating from the 1950s<sup>1</sup>.

The results of this analysis was a model with the patron/user/ now customer/information consumer and producer at the centre and the kind of dialectic that has been set up among and between the identity of the consumer, the increasing adoption of business practices by the public sector, and the corporatization of public discourses. Two significant findings are highlighted: (1) The fallout associated with public librarianship's historical attachment to (and surprising ambiguity towards) the materiality of the book (as well as the association of the profession with books) and the impact of its digitization on the field's discourse and practices vis-à-vis the information consumer—producer. And (2) the novel ways in which public libraries are variously appropriating the productive and free labour of their users (in physical and cyberspace) and in so doing performing important ideological work on the part of the neoliberal state and information capital, while simultaneously foreclosing on a more just alternative future.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Recognizing the extreme political and economic pressures within which public libraries operate, the purpose of this research is not to caution against these potentially emancipatory technologies, but rather to lay bear those instances wherein public librarians and researchers may be inadvertently contributing to a political and economic system at odds with their values through the promotion of technical innovations in aid of economic rather than the social progress. There are alternatives (cf. Samek, 2006; Budd, 2003) and the paper ends with a review of some FOSS social networking projects and other kinds of innovative public information initiatives of relevance to public librarians and which serve, unequivocally, a community of citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Library Association. 1955. *The need for a Provincial Library: A brief submitted to the Government of Ontario December 23*; Wallace, W.S. 1957. *Provincial Library Service in Ontario*. Toronto: Ontario Department of Education; St. John, Francis, R. 1966. *A Survey of Libraries in the Province of Ontario 1965*. [Toronto, s.n.]; Bowron. 1975. *The Ontario Public Library: Review and Reorganization*; Ontario Provincial Advisory Committee. 1980. Long Range Planning Task Force. *Entering the 80's*. 4 reports. [s.l.: s.n.]; The Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan. 1990. *One Place to Look: The Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications; Strategic Directions Committee. 1996. *A Call to Action: Specific Initiatives to Advance Public Library Development in Ontario*; Newman, Wendy. 2008. *Third generation public libraries: visionary thinking and service development in public libraries (to 2020) and potential applications in Ontario*. Toronto: Ministry of Culture.

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